

radical democracy

interview:

bruce hartford

civil rights, union and peace
activists/organizer

CORE, SCLC, SDS, N-VAC

#freedommovement

David Olson interviews Bruce Hartford for *Radical Democracy*

A longtime civil rights, anti-war, and union activist/organizer, Bruce has worked with the Congress of Racial Equality [CORE], the Southern Christian Leadership Conference [SCLC], the Non-Violent Action Committee [N-VAC], and Students for a Democratic Society [SDS].

Bruce has participated in many nonviolent direction actions, including the March on Washington in 1963, the March to Montgomery in '65, and the Meredith Mississippi March Against Fear in '66. As a freelance journalist in Vietnam in the early '70s, he helped U.S. Marines publish *Semper Fi*, an underground anti-war newspaper. He has also organized with the International Longshore and Warehouse Union and National Writers Union.

Today, he publishes the Civil Rights Movement Veterans website, crmvet.org, which includes photos, interviews, documents, essays, and other writings from or about the Civil Rights or Southern Freedom Movement. We spoke with Bruce in the summer of 2016.

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Radical Democracy: I came across the Civil Rights Movement Veterans website while doing research about the Freedom Schools in Mississippi. It felt like I had hit the motherlode of information about the Freedom Movement. It's powerful stuff.

Bruce Hartford: What makes our site unique is that all the substantive material about the Freedom Movement on our site was written or created by people who were participants in the Movement – an organizer for SNCC, or SCLC, or CORE, a local activist or high school student. Someone who was active, as opposed to a reporter or academic or author or graduate student who researched the Freedom Movement. We see our site as the voice of those whose boots were on the ground. We make no pretense whatsoever of academic neutrality — which frankly I don't believe exists. Nobody is ever neutral in human affairs. But we don't pretend to be neutral. We are advocates. **We believed in the Freedom Movement then, we believe in it now, we are still fighting for those causes and this is the site where we say how we view it.**

RD: The impression I got from school was that the civil rights protests and direct actions of the 1960s were mostly spontaneous, so I was almost shocked as I began to realize the huge amount of serious organizing work and strategizing that was actually involved.

Bruce Hartford Interview con't

BH: We're quite pissed off at the way the Freedom Movement is taught to children and students today. I think that one of the roots of the idea that this was all spontaneous is the way in which the Montgomery Bus Boycott and Rosa Parks are depicted. "Here's this poor little seamstress woman, tired from work, one day she's on the bus and they tell her to move and with this courage she refuses, and sparks a great thing, just out of the blue."

Well, Rosa Parks was the Secretary of the NAACP, and leader of the Youth Division of the NAACP, in Montgomery, Alabama. She had been attending workshops at Highlander Center, talking about strategies of nonviolent resistance. They had been planning a bus boycott for more than a year and she had been integral to those plans. It's true that on that particular December night, there had not been a pre-planned thing that she would resist. But all of the organizing and planning for that event had been going on for more than a year, and when she was asked to move, all of that came into play. And then the organization to get that bus boycott effective was enormous. But you get none of that from this kind of *Aesop's Fables* picture of Rosa Parks and the bus boycott.

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BH: Another thing we are very critical of is how the Freedom Movement is presented as a disconnected series of unique events in a few places. Alabama: the bus boycott. Birmingham: the Children's Crusade. Selma: the march. Mississippi Freedom Summer, the March on Washington — that's about it. We snidely refer to the education of the civil rights movement in this country as, "Rosa sat so Martin could march so Obama could run." That's how it's presented, in this simplistic presentation that completely leaves out, as you said, *serious* organizing, *serious* strategizing.

Going back to Montgomery, there were two or three previous incidents prior to Rosa Parks. And each time, the movement strategists analyzed the situation, considered triggering the boycott, and for tactical reasons chose not to. **The point I'm making is that strategizing, thinking, and planning played an enormously important role in the success of the Freedom Movement. Planning, strategizing, organizing and discipline. Self-discipline.** Not, "You do this or I'll hurt you," type discipline, but, "We want to win, this is what it's going to take to win, therefore I will do what is necessary to win." That kind of self-discipline in movement activism was absolutely essential and is quite the opposite of "Do your own thing." Or, "Well, you're going to do this, and I'll do that." To survive, to succeed, we had to have discipline.

RD: Much of the Southern Freedom Movement was focused on voting rights – expanding who gets to participate in the democratic process. One of the things Radical Democracy explores is the idea of expanding *how* people participate a democracy to affect change, outside of voting.

BH: Sure. Look at Ferguson: a Black majority town, fairly decent Black registration. The number of Blacks who are registered to vote outnumber the number of whites, and Blacks vote in fair numbers in the Presidential elections. But in the local elections, which are the off-year elections for the mayor, and the chief of police, and the City Council, and the people who actually affect life in Ferguson, only six percent of Blacks of voting age voted. So it's no wonder that they had a local government that reflected what it reflected.

The emphasis needs to be not only to organize, but to maintain an organization and keep it functioning. In other words, to have a center of political power that is independent of and separate from the annual election cycle. What they teach us in school is that democracy equals voting. And that's all that democracy is. You go vote, and that's democracy. But that's sham democracy. That's pretend democracy. Because if that's all that you do, you're just voting between Candidate A, who represents

Bruce Hartford Interview con't

wealth and power, and Candidate B, who also represents wealth and power, but has a slightly different position on gay people, or reproductive rights, or something like that.

If you don't have organized political power, then the choices at the ballot box are not choices at all.

And even if they are real choices and your choice wins, you have no way of holding that office-holder accountable. If we're talking about democracy, it cannot be restricted to voting every other year. Democracy is something people have to be involved in consistently, and regularly.

RD: There's been an increase of movement activity lately, and a lot of talk about organized political power, and "political revolution." What do you make of all this new revolution talk?

BH: I think one of the disservices done by Marxists of the late '60s and early '70s is that they froze the concept of revolution into something that looked like the revolution in China and Russia, or Cuba. And so that's what the word "revolution" means: that kind of sudden, sharp, total change in both government and economic systems. **I think we need a broader definition of what is revolutionary. What Occupy did with the 1 percent and the 99 percent was a conceptual revolution for this country, one that was long needed.**

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BH: My parents were communists. In the '30s and '40s they were union organizers. They fought for the right to form unions, for social security, for unemployment insurance, for a government mandated minimum wage — what we now refer to as “the social safety net” that Roosevelt, responding to public pressure, instituted as what he called The New Deal. That resulted in a repudiation of *laissez faire*, unregulated free-booter capitalism that amounted to a social "revolution" in how both society and government viewed economic policy. A revolution that the Koch brothers, Tea Party, and others on the far-right have been trying to roll back for generations.

RD: Not many people associate the New Deal with revolution these days.

BH: That's because social political pressure is never mentioned in our school history books. No one knows about the mass marches, the sit-down strikes, the street battles against evictions, the rural land occupations resisting foreclosure or the ten strikers who were shot to death by police on Chicago's South Side. **There's no PBS documentaries, no museum art shows, no remembrance of the mass social struggle that forced FDR to adopt his New Deal.** My Mom was almost trampled by a police riot-control horse while she was helping resist a tenant eviction on the Lower East Side, the Klan in Mississippi threatened to kill my Dad because he was a union organizer. And so on.

BH: If you look at the lives of the bottom half of the economic pyramid before and after the New Deal, that amounted to a revolution in my opinion. Yes, you still had the same government in power and many of the same people, and yes, the wealthy certainly still dominated, but in terms of peoples' lives in factories and farms, their lives were revolutionized. *Those* are the kinds of revolutions that I think are possible in our society. In no advanced industrial country has there been a revolution of the kind that Marxists posit.

There's a connection, or continuity with what is going on today with what we were doing in the '60s. But what we were doing in the '60s was a continuity or carrying forward of what people were doing in the '50s and the '40s. We always saw our struggle as our phase of a multigenerational struggle for freedom, equality and justice. We never thought we invented that. We thought, well, this is how we're doing it. This is our phase of it, and we're doing it in certain ways that our elders didn't, and may even be frowning upon. But we are their children, their political children, the political descendants of the Double V campaign, of the returned GIs who fought, and so on.

What I see today are the political grandchildren of our Freedom Movement of the '60s. Take for example the minimum wage fight: the Fight for \$15. Go back to the March on Washington in 1963. Any time that's

mentioned in the public schools, or in the media, or on a PBS documentary, what do you get? **You get what is called Dr. King's "I Have a Dream" speech. He didn't call it that. If you look at his actual speech, the first half of it is about economic issues — about economic inequality, poverty, economic justice.** It's the last half of the speech that has the "I have a dream part," and that's the only part that's quoted. People call it "The March on Washington," but that's not its name. It was called "The March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom." Half of the demands were around economic rights. They were economic demands.

One of those economic demands was to raise the minimum wage from — I think — \$1.15 an hour to \$2.00 an hour. Well, if you look at what two dollars was worth in 1963, you'll see that it is worth about \$15.30 today. So, the Fight for 15 is essentially the *exact same demand* that we had in the March on Washington in 1963, over fifty years ago. Actually, we were a little more "radical": what we were demanding was thirty cents more.

RD: The same themes keep coming up today...

BH: Black Lives Matter. Police killing people — racially motivated or influenced killing by police — was certainly an issue we faced back in the '60s. Jimmy Lee Jackson was killed by a state trooper.

Bruce Hartford Interview con't

Benjamin Brown was killed by a Mississippi State Trooper — you've never heard of that name, but there were people killed, and of course we tried to fight against it. But we had no success whatsoever in dealing with police killing people because of their color or because of their political activity. What we did have great success in doing was stopping vigilante mob, civilian lynchings. **Back in 1964, I don't remember the exact statistic, but it was something like one racially motivated lynching in this country each week. Each week.**

Now when something like that happens — like the guy in Jessup, Texas who was dragged behind a truck — any time there's that kind of racially motivated lynching by people who are not police, that becomes instant mass media news. It's prosecuted, and it is stopped.

The lynching of blacks, Latinos, Asians, Jews and other undesirable elements like labor organizers was so common prior to our movement in the '60s that the mass media never covered it, and the local media covered it as a sporting event.

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Bruce Hartford Interview con't

You can see the pictures; they bring their children to the lynching and they're pointing with smiles on their faces to the burned bodies and cutting off ears as souvenirs. The local paper is writing articles like it is a sporting event.

We changed that. That is no longer a part of America. That is no longer acceptable. Now Black Lives Matter has taken up the issue of police racially motivated killings. **It was so common back then for cops to kill undesirables because of race or poverty or whatever that is was not even counted. There are no statistics the way there are about lynchings.** So I see Black Lives Matter as our political grandchildren, if you will. Our focus was on lynchings. Their focus is on police. I say more power to them.

RD: Reading the first hand stories on the CRMVet website, you realize there is a history of change. People didn't accept that it's too hard, or just the natural way of things, or the Southern way of life. They fought anyway. We're not there yet, it's not over. But maybe it's not ever over.

Bruce Hartford Interview con't

BH: I totally agree. **This is not a race with a finish line. This is a multigenerational journey with milestones.** Electing a black president was not the finish line. It was an important milestone. But after each milestone, there's the next one down the road.

RD: And here we are today, still moving down that road...

BH: Exactly.



Some of Bruce's writing and his oral history can be found on the Civil Rights Movement Veterans website.

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